

Kai Nielsen

Emeritus Professor of Philosophy

University of Calgary

Oh What a Wonderful World

I

Since when I first read Bertolt Brecht's words, which I shall now quote, they have echoed through my heart and mind. He wrote "we who would build the foundations of kindness could not always afford to be kind." That was true and is something to be taken assiduously to heart and to head. Yet for my close friend George Kateb, a very knowledgeable, perceptive, humanely-minded, and politically and philosophically astute political theorist, Brecht's remark was chilling and disturbing. For Friedrich Nietzsche, as I would surmise, to be for kindness should meet the same contempt as he had for talk of pity or compassion. But for me Brecht's words ring true and movingly so and are also sustained by hard-nosed non-evasive reflection. We want or at least should want what we rarely come to even remotely have is a world of kindness. But its reality is something for whose existence we should struggle for even against the worst of odds. But we must also realize, and take this into account, and to heart, in our

struggles and non-evasively to do so. In the civil war between the Whites and the Reds in Russia over the Russian revolution that was often so. Neither side was in a position to take and hold prisoners. This being so, executions obtained and necessarily so. However, we must not be light-hearted and uncaring about that let alone take pleasure in its dreadful reality. Nietzsche would have shown the same or at least similar contempt for talk of kindness as he had for pity or compassion for what he called the herd or the mob. He thought such talk was emotively and cognitively dysfunctional. But on the contrary it need not be. He would have been well served by that remark of Brecht's. But it was uttered after his time.

I want to say here something like last words while remaining utterly skeptical of their attaining anything like a finality or non-contingency other than perhaps being the last words I happen to utter. But this should not be taken to demean the effort. A world of kindness need not be herdish nor the setting out of a Nietzschean intellectual autocracy nor an articulation, a claim of the rule of passions or that of a Nietzschean 'higher person'. Such persons there may be and, though hopefully, should be listened to they should not rule the world. An intellectual aristocracy is one thing, an aristocratic rule is another. The latter should be rigorously and firmly opposed.

II

Nietzsche stresses being hard in political action. Sometimes we must be hard but not often. We normally should be caring. And we should always be reasonable and never dogmatic. But

we sometimes should be without any skepticism about common sense matters, e.g. that the winters are warmer in Florida than in Quebec and that cars need brakes and similarly many determinate scientific matters very much matter including our attunement to certain of them, those with a bearing on human well being. For example, over the reality of global warming. But not over Trump's proclamations about it. We should however be fallibilists through and through. But that is not to be skeptical or relativistic. Or bending over to Trump, that is to be irrational and unreasonable.

I have been called an "evangelical atheist". Well I am through and through an atheist. But by now like Richard Rorty talk about religion, pro or con, bores me. Indeed the whole matter bores me. I hope that religion will slowly and peacefully without trauma or dogmatic proclamation, wither away. Do I think it may happen? I wouldn't bet my ranch on it. The Soviet attempt to shut it down was remarkably unsuccessful. If it does, it will be a slow withering away. My study of anthropology makes me dubious that such withering away will ever happen. Though there will come to be a lot more secularists around. If global warming doesn't shut we human beings down.

There are a people around who claim they are spiritual but not religious. That baffles me. Moreover religion is always changing. But unfortunately religion in some forms has a staying power but it varies radically. The Quaker's God or a Congregationalist Whitehead's one God at the most are both very different from that of the Saudi's form of Islam with their commitment to public beheading. It is also very different from Calvinism or Catholicism. And there are all

kinds of different religious behavior in between these two extremes. But to my mind unfortunately religion has a staying power. But in Scandinavia it seems to have had its day. And there is a lot of withering of religion in Quebec and Italy, both formerly religious strongholds. And even Ireland is somewhat upset.

Religion varies radically from culture to culture. It is one thing to practice religion in Holland another in Iran, to say nothing of Saudi Arabia or Yemen. But there is no perennial religion any more than there is a perennial philosophy. Anthropology, history, and geography show the reality of that. Philosophy cannot gainsay that though it has tried unsuccessfully to do so.

However to have the beliefs that I have does not at all mean that I want to close religion down. That is not on my agenda. Most religious beliefs are not vicious. Though a few are and those urgently need shutting down. All are scant on reality, including the harmless ones. Nor do I, pace Nietzsche take it to be the case that there is what he called a herd morality which he thought went with socialism, anarchism and even with some forms of modernity. All faiths, or more cautiously, almost all faiths are in one way or another illusion supporting. Some unwittingly encourage ignorance. But there is no herd morality to underwrite socialism or that emerges with it.

Nietzsche along with many others wished to be morally and politically hard. He was against democracy but he was not a fascist nor an anti-Semite nor anti-Islamic nor a nationalist.

He was not even a German nationalist. Remember he became a Swiss citizen. He was also a Francophile. He wished his writings had been in French. He wanted a firm rule by an intelligent, informed and disciplined class of übermensch. They in his view rule over the uneducated and ill-educated undisciplined herd or mob. This did not mean that he wanted to kill them or brutalize them. Not at all. But he was for them to be ruled over by a disciplined, knowledgeable intelligentsia determined to overcome mob rule. I do not suggest those attitudes were correct or desirable. But those were his attitudes. And they are not unreasonable, though they conflict, of course, with my commitment to a world of kindness.

I would not condone or even treat with sympathy that Nietzschean authoritarianism even if it was by such a reasonable elite. But it would be better than the elite control we have now in many places. Now control by those who happen to be owners of great wealth. Sometimes they are philistines. As is the case with Trump. Even so, it would be better than mob or herd control which is rare and short-lived. What Nietzsche thought socialism would be. And better by far than what we have now. That is, control by those of immense wealth whether Trump-like or Hillary Clinton-like or even by decent, though rare, Billionaires. We should instead want people to be in control of their own lives. But we should also like for all of them to be so and also for all of them to be decently educated people. But this does not mean that they should all be intellectuals.

Democracy has not typically been such a great thing, particularly if we count what has usually counted as democracies as democracies. The USA is an autocracy not a democracy.

Voting is a necessary not a sufficient condition for a democratic nation. Belarus and the oil rich nations to Russia's south are also not democracies. All of them were part of the Soviet Union. Canada elected Harper a disgrace that preceded Justin Trudeau, nothing to write home about, either, though he is an improvement on Harper. All capitalist politicians are not equally bad. The United States has Trump, Germany once elected Hitler the first time around only. Russia elected Yeltsin and Putin, the former was instrumental in smashing socialism there. The United States has a long history of not making good choices for president. They missed out with not electing Henry Wallace who might have avoided the debacle of the Cold War and surely the atom bombing of Japan. Something that was horrible and unnecessary. They also missed out to a somewhat lesser extent in not electing Adlai Stevenson or George McGovern and most recently not electing Bernie Sanders. They now have Trump, the model of all disasters. He is an exemplar of what no democracy should ever be. A paradigm case of an ignorant megalomaniac autocrat trying to be an aristocrat; thoroughly racist, sexist and philistine. Something to make the USA both ashamed and worried.

What is needed is what John Dewey or Thorsten Veblen took as a democracy. We should want people to control, to rule their own lives. And there need not be and should not be Nietzsche's herd control and there also should not be any herds, either. Even Trumpism is not in for herd control, though he is for propagandistically shaping "the herd". Trump is being used. He is being used by some Billionaires in shaping and using the herd in attempting to control things in what he takes to be in his own interest. Trump is a nasty, sexist and dangerous example

of a political leader who is not only an embarrassment but a dangerous menace. That is not only dangerous but saddening.

A better life is possible and obviously desirable but not very likely. Not only because of Billionaire Capitalist elite control but because of a disastrous human made climate change disaster. We must struggle on resolutely but intelligently and informedly. We live in a disastrous and terrible world. We very much need Brecht's sought world of kindliness but also need a well-informed and intelligent people. Our chances are slight for either but we must struggle for it using our heads and attending to our hearts. No Nietzschean elitism and no Trumpism. The latter yielding a philistine primitivism with its often dangerous nastiness.

I was from early on personally lucky. Many of my initial school mates were not. That was during the Great Depression. My parents were not affected or at least not severely so. But generally for the population suffering and tough luck was extensive. It was the lot for many peoples worlds. And it still is. We talk of desert and lack of desert here but contra that, we should recognize that a people's lot is rooted in their enculturation. I would never say people deserve their fate, whether good or bad. Desert talk is not a part of my vocabulary. Some are lucky to have things go well for them. Most are not. We should neither pity nor blame them. Things have gone well for me in a horrible world. But talk about desert should be avoided. Where our collective life is so miserable we should struggle against this miserableness. Even decency is scant on the ground but it is something we should struggle for. But decency is not enough. We need kindliness as well. But we must not be utopians. But we also must not be dystopians either.